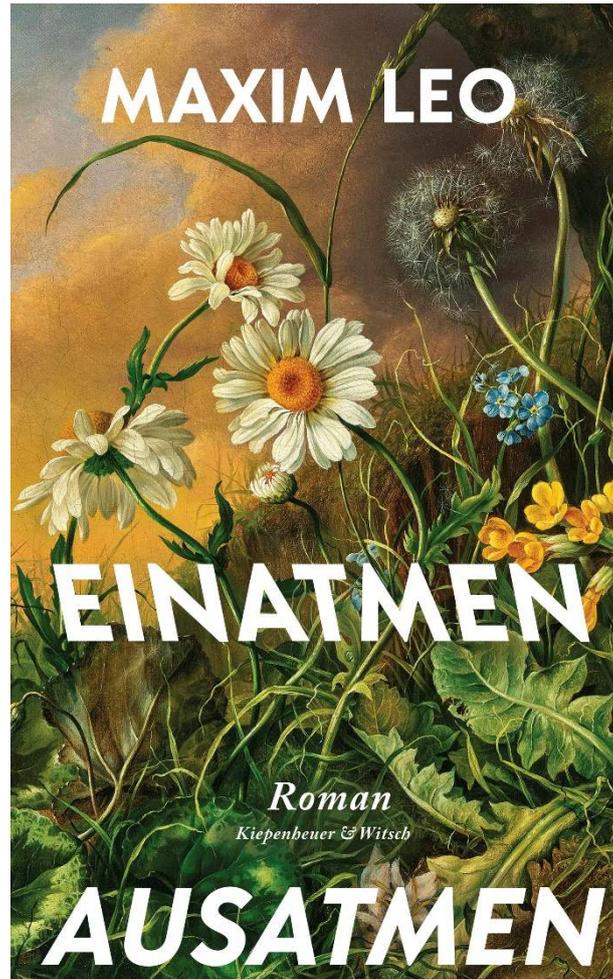


INHALE. EXHALE

by Maxim Leo

Sample translation by Jamie Bulloch



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Marlene had always found travelling a dreadful experience. Everything went astray: her routines, the places she was familiar with, and the people she'd learned to put up with. And what did she get out of it? All manner of unpleasant surprises, strange smells, bewildering impressions and superfluous information. It was said that people travel because they're curious. Marlene suspected the truth was that they just wanted to escape their lives.

She tossed the light-brown bag onto the bed, opened the wardrobe and pondered what to take. She hadn't been to the country in ages and had no idea what you wore to some silly mindfulness institution. Presumably something made of out felt or fairtrade batik rather than the Armani trouser suits that hung in her wardrobe. Years ago she'd plumped for a stretch-wool design with a narrow lapel and comfortable waist, and now had it in about twenty different colours. To be precise, in different shades of grey, blue and black. She paired these with round-collared cream silk chiffon blouses. It meant that she didn't have to spend long thinking in the morning before driving to work – everything went with everything else.

At the bottom of the wardrobe she found a box that said 'Holiday Clothes'. Interesting, Marlene thought. She couldn't remember what was inside, just as she couldn't recall any holiday. Whenever she took time off it

was only because there was something to sort out at her mother's retirement residence. Once she'd tried to spend a long weekend on Sylt because she'd heard that this was what single women in their mid-thirties liked to do. But she'd left the maritime-themed holiday apartment with hot tub and wood-burner after only a day because she was bored senseless.

Marlene had never understood the principle behind a holiday: the idea of purposefully going somewhere to do nothing. She'd made a real effort, even buying a book, some novel about a woman who lived on a North Sea island. Then she'd sat on the holiday-apartment sofa, snuggled up in the holiday-apartment snuggle blanket and drunk a hibiscus tea. But after about twenty minutes her eyes were merely skimming the pages of the book mechanically and she was looking for some sort of distraction. She might have even been happy if a water pipe had burst because at least something would have happened.

She then tried a walk on the beach, a favourite pastime on Sylt. The woman in her book was doing this all the time, enjoying the wind breezing through her hair, the smell of the seaweed and the taste of sea salt on her lips. When Marlene arrived at the beach and saw the couples wrapped in Gore-Tex jackets shuffling across the wet sand, she found it hard to feel that great sense of pleasure that the woman in the novel had been going on about the whole time. After a few steps her shoes were wet, the wind was whistling in her ears and the seaweed didn't – as described in the book –

smell of great expanses and freedom, but of rotten eggs. Were these the moments that other people looked forward to with such relish? The loveliest time of the year?

Marlene liked her air-conditioned office on the fourteenth floor of a skyscraper by Hamburg's Aussenalster, where everything had a clear, rational order, where interesting, challenging things were always happening, where she was surrounded by assistants who didn't expect her to engage in rambling conversations and who were able at any moment to produce a good espresso. Here she didn't have to relax and didn't have to escape everyday life – this had been most important realisation of her weekend by the sea: she really liked her everyday life.

Opening the box of holiday clothes, she found several colourful T-shirts, a pair of light-blue jeans, a raincoat and a pair of Nike trainers that clearly hadn't been worn. Now she remembered why she had these things. It had been an attempt to go to Madeira with Markus, her boyfriend at the time. Which hadn't worked because some product launch had got in the way, causing Markus to ask if her job was more important than he was. What a strange question, Marlene thought. If the day were to come when a man meant more to her than her work, then this would be a sign that she urgently needed a new job.

Well, maybe she shouldn't have said this to Markus quite so bluntly, but she found it important to be honest. What was the point of pretending?

She saw it all around her, these marriages that only worked because at least one of the spouses was dissembling. Often it was both of them affecting to be something they weren't, because they thought this would make them more attractive or compatible. At some point the marriage came to an end and those involved hadn't only lost their partner but themselves too, because after all the years of pretence they no longer knew who they actually were.

Well, at least she'd been spared that. Markus had flown to Madeira on his own and he'd ended the relationship soon afterwards. She thought that was a pity because he'd really been a nice, uncomplicated guy – but so clingy!

She took the light-blue jeans out of the box – they might still fit. The T-shirts seemed to be OK too. But would these clothes last her two weeks? No sooner had this thought popped into her head than she felt a pang of despair. How was she going to put up with two weeks in that babble academy? Two whole bloody weeks?

Last Thursday Dr Finckenstein, the boss, major shareholder and CEO of Aviola, had invited her into his office for a chat. He'd started by showering her with praise because she was so efficient, capable and decisive. Then, as she'd been expecting, he'd turned to the future, stating frankly that she was to be his successor when he retired next year.

That had been an unbelievable moment, even though she'd been anticipating it. But when such a long-cherished dream finally became reality

it was very special. She felt buoyant, elated even, and at the same time weighed down by the responsibility that would soon be on her shoulders. But before she could properly savour her delight, Dr Finckenstein said that there was just one problem. 'However much I value your expertise, dear Marlene, I do wonder whether you have the personality necessary to be able to successfully run a business like this.'

There followed a list of anonymous critical comments from staff, mainly calling into question her character and style of leadership. 'Colleagues describe you as lacking in empathy. They get the impression that they're invisible as far as you're concerned,' Dr Finckenstein said. 'A number of them feel under pressure rather than motivated. They talk of a cold atmosphere dominated by fear. Apparently you're very sparing with your praise.'

Obviously this came as a shock to Marlene. A cold atmosphere dominated by fear? This wasn't some Siberian gulag! In the departments she was responsible for the general rule was that every employee should be viewed as an individual. Good people didn't need guidance; they knew what they had to do to get results. The staff members who'd complained about her were clearly those who weren't performing and who Marlene had therefore brought to book.

No doubt there were different ways of dealing with these sorts of problems, but Marlene had no truck with sweet-talking people. A business

wasn't a Montessori school where even the failures were given compliments before their problems were cautiously addressed. The only result of all this praise and motivation was that people failed to realise their own shortcomings. You didn't help them by concealing their weaknesses, by 'focusing on the positives', as trumpeted by management courses. Why should employees make any progress if everything was fine? How could they discover their strengths if they were only ever treated with kid gloves? The whole world functioned according to the principle of pressure and counterpressure. Marlene was convinced that this was the most honest and transparent principle that existed.

Besides, nobody could fail to see that the results in her departments were considerably better than those of others. Wasn't this precisely the reason why Dr Finckenstein wanted her as his successor rather than one of those 'feel-good' managers, which the company had enough of at executive level?

She'd told the boss all of this in so many words, at which he'd ventured a brief smile before returning to the incident from a fortnight earlier. A woman from accounts had come to Marlene because she'd felt sexually harassed by her head of department. This man had paid the woman forthright compliments about her appearance, 'given her inappropriate looks', as the woman said, and repeatedly invited her to dinner 'in a rather sleazy way'. Marlene had been under a lot of stress on the day that she

talked to the woman and didn't take the incident particularly seriously. She knew the head of department; he might be a macho but he was completely harmless. She said as much to her colleague and advised her to look at the matter positively. After all, she'd been praised by her boss – surely there were worse things in life.

The woman had then gone straight to the HR department and lodged a complaint about Marlene, after which the matter made its way up to the board, which rebuked her for insensitivity. And sure, looking at it now she had to admit that her reaction might not have exactly been the best. She'd probably seen the matter too much from her own perspective. Marlene herself would have simply given the guy the cold shoulder, reminding him that he was married and ugly, and then spread the story amongst her colleagues. As she realised, responding in such a way was of course easier if you were the man's superior, which was why she'd then apologised to the woman.

'This incident shows that you still have room for development when it comes to personnel management,' Dr Finckenstein had said. Instead of acknowledging this with a nod, she'd stupidly embarked on a lecture about the position of women in the company. Marlene began by saying that she'd never had anything gifted to her. On the contrary, she'd always had to be far stronger than her male rivals who'd all underestimated her, because women were supposedly so soft, cooperative and understanding. 'If I'd been like

that, dear Dr Finckelstein, I'd never have made the career I have now. And you wouldn't want me as your successor either.'

Here too the boss had nodded in agreement, which is why – even more recklessly – she'd come out with the remark that these days everyone was always offended, shocked or their dignity deeply wounded. 'My God, we've become a world full of snowflakes.'

The boss had stopped nodding. 'Ten years ago, dear Marlene, such a viewpoint might have made you manager of the year,' he'd said. 'Nowadays it will see you sent straight to an awareness course.'

She'd thought that was a joke at first, but then she realised Dr Finckenstein was being perfectly serious. 'You'll pay a visit to Alex Grow, a top-notch business coach,' he said. 'He runs intensive courses, two weeks in a small castle in Brandenburg. We'll have another chat after that.'

Alright then, Marlene had thought, I'll be there a fortnight, stick it out, get my awareness certificate and everything will be fine. But the boss seemed to have read her mind. 'Take it seriously, Marlene. This is your big chance. I can only support you if you change your attitude towards managing staff, if you're ready to become a modern boss.'

'After two weeks?'

'What's most important to me is that you really engage with this, that you critically examine the way you interact with colleagues and come

to some new conclusions. Then there will be nothing stopping you from being appointed CEO of Aviola.’

This was how things stood. Cursing, Marlene grabbed her travel bag, closed the door to her apartment behind her and felt like a newly sentenced convict on her way to prison.

He tried to ignore the breathing sounds coming from the other side of the bed. No easy matter when there's nothing else to be heard, when the night envelops the world in a deep silence. What is worse than sleeplessness? When beside you someone's sleeping peacefully, their breathing provocatively regular, in a state of relaxation that makes you increasingly tense.

A glance at the illuminated display of the clock radio told Alex that the goodnight kiss Johanna had given him was four and a half hours ago. She'd nodded off soon afterwards. First he'd tried the 4-7-8 method – breathing through his nose for four seconds, holding his breath for seven and then breathing out for eight. It normally got him to sleep but this time it didn't work. Nor did Jacobsen's progressive muscle relaxation or the admittedly rather hectic meditation exercise afterwards.

It was also due to Johanna, because he wasn't used to having someone sleep in his bed. Six months ago Johanna had booked the module *Self-confidence, self-love and self-awareness*, and had ended up in his training group. Of course, getting involved with a client was an absolute no-no; it was the first time that something like this had happened to him in the twenty years since he'd founded the Academy. The fact that they hadn't got close until she'd almost finished her course didn't make it any better. The

prohibition on physical intimacy was one of the fundamental principles of life coaching. Alex had once fired an assistant who'd snogged a course participant in the kitchenette and now he was allowing himself to commit the same faux-pas! If any of his staff or the public got wind of this he'd be screwed.

With a sigh Alex turned over onto his left side, pulled his leg up to his chest and closed his eyes. As if he didn't have enough problems already! Only yesterday the latest figures had come in: over the last quarter the Academy's losses had increased again. Things had been going this way for two years. If he hadn't kept expanding his credit facility and even pumped in some of his own money the Academy would have already gone bankrupt. Sure, he could let go of some people or close individual departments, but then everyone else would find out about his problems. And if 'Germany's most famous coach', as the *Bild-Zeitung* had referred to him again only recently, couldn't keep his own house in order, what would he be able to teach the managers of other companies?

These manager courses brought in the most revenue, but they interested him the least. After all, he hadn't founded the Academy to optimise management structures in listed tech firms, but to help people take control of their lives. This was what still inspired him the most, even though, now a manager himself, he had less and less time to work directly with clients.

The nicest time had been right at the beginning when he'd started with just two assistants at the old factory in Cologne. Helping people who were seeking to discover themselves, cast off their burdens, jettison their fears, develop new strength and hope – this was fantastic. Even back then it had been evident that he had a talent for gazing into people's souls, sensing their tangles, wounds and needs, however esoteric that sounded. At the time he didn't care how something sounded. What was important was that it felt right. He had followed his instincts without knowing where they would lead him. He'd given free rein to his emotions and watched what happened. Maybe this was what the others had felt when they were with him, what gave them the courage to strike a path for themselves.

Like the prospective candidate for chancellor, the 'game changer', as people might say now. Back in the day one of his clients had worked at SPD headquarters in Bonn and asked him whether he could envisage helping a prominent friend in the party to overcome a very private problem. This man's problem was that his third wife had just done a runner, greatly unsettling him and causing him to doubt that he could lead his party in the election. After a few sessions it became clear that the actual cause of his uncertainty lay somewhere quite different. The man was so pleased at this he immediately announced his candidacy and, six months later, his fourth wife on his arm, won the election.

Having become chancellor, the man told this story with extraordinary candour in an interview he gave to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. ‘Alex Grow made me chancellor,’ the headline read, which sealed his reputation as a soul whisperer. When that same year a well-known singer also made public how Alex had freed her from her self-doubt, he was swamped with enquiries from clients.

Thus it began and the Academy grew at dizzying speed. First he bought the castle in Schönerlinde in Brandenburg, which had ten hectares of parkland that bordered on a magnificent beech wood. Then he hired dozens of coaches, as well as nutritionists, yoga teachers, physiotherapists, dance teachers, psychologists, gardeners, caretakers and marketing and PR people. He pinched a pulmonologist from the Charité hospital who helped clients with deep breathing and flew in three yogis from an ashram in Bengaluru, who developed the meditation centre. Later these were joined by Gestalt therapists, NLP specialists, business coaches, thalassotherapy masters and Ayurvedic chefs. Now there were one hundred and seventy employees inhabiting the castle premises in their rust-coloured uniforms made of wild Indian silk.

The astonishing thing was that it really worked – this meteoric rise had taken place without any major dramas. And then came *The Show with Alex Grow* on television, followed by the *AG Magazine* and the *Here Comes Alex* podcast. For ten years the business boomed, then demand fell slightly

but things were still going really well until Alex had a breakdown three years ago.

It came out of the blue, he said at the time, which of course was nonsense. The strain on Alex had been so huge that even with the greatest pleasure and devotion he wouldn't have been able to overcome it in the long term. And, to be honest, the pleasure and devotion were no longer so intense. The Academy had become an immense machine constantly in need of more fuel. And at some point Alex's tank had run empty. Although he lived, as it were, at the epicentre of awareness, he hadn't realised this. All of a sudden they were there, the black thoughts circling him like crows, the tightness in the chest, this absurdly sad sadness. All these things his clients had kept telling him about had now descended on him too.

Surrounded by people who knew how to revive burned-out over-achievers like himself, Alex got out of this trough pretty quickly again. Which was why later he no longer talked of the 'breakdown' but merely the 'incident', the 'check', the 'minor warning signal'.

Although he was back up and running soon, something had changed, something had been lost that he was unable to put a name to. Even today he found it hard to come up with words to express that feeling. Possibly because it was an emotional void, something no longer there that he had to listen to, like an amputee who feels their arm only as a phantom pain. To put

it briefly and inexactly, he lacked the positive energy that had probably been his chief business capital.

Without this energy he felt empty, the coaching mantras became mere hollow words and his former radiance was now only recognisable as a dim glow. The change was not immediately apparent; the machine kept turning and he'd brought in excellent people who performed brilliantly. Even Alex himself was still a good coach – people who hadn't known him before might even regard him as a very good coach. But of course he sensed the difference. He had the techniques, the timing and the experience. But the magic, that indescribable element that most of his fellow coaches had probably never known, was gone.

Alex turned over. His heart was beating nervously; this nighttime brooding was frazzling him. How was he going to get any peace? Pushing the duvet aside, he sat up and slowly opened his eyes. The moon bathed the room in a milky light. Johanna was lying on her back; he could see her thick eyelashes, the slightly open mouth. Alex got up, wandered across the creaky parquet floor to the window and gazed out at the park that lay beneath a fine veil of mist. Standing on the large lawn in front of the castle was a wild boar, burrowing in the earth with its snout. 'I don't believe it!' Alex hissed. How many times had he told Mattissen to strengthen the fence on the woodland side to prevent these bloody creatures from ruining their beautiful yoga lawn? He opened the window and clapped his hands, which didn't

appear to unsettle the boar at all. When he shouted, 'Bugger off!' the animal did flinch and trot off. Johanna turned around in bed with a faint sigh.

'What's wrong?' she said. 'Nothing,' Alex replied, shutting the window angrily and returning to bed. The new course participants would be arriving at ten o'clock. He urgently needed some sleep before then.

But he only started brooding again. It struck him how absurd it was that he was able to show others the way, but didn't know how to go forward himself. His second breakdown had only been three months ago. It happened in the middle of a group session when he was explaining to the participants a practical exercise in active self-love. All of a sudden he got the impression that the others thought he was ridiculous. He saw it in their eyes; they gloated at him with unconcealed hatred. They wanted to see him fail. And although he knew he was merely imagining all of this, knew that not a single person on the course wished him evil, he wasn't able to shake off the panic. He ran outside into the park, where he howled until his assistant found him and took him to his apartment.

There hadn't been any more incidents since but the fear remained. The crows were circling and although he couldn't see them, he knew they were there. To begin with he still thought he could heal himself as he always had done in the past, but those wonderful tools and methods he'd been able to help so many people with over the years no longer seemed to work with him. He was like a believer who'd lost his god.

All the same Alex didn't allow himself to get downcast. He was disciplined and did his job as best he could, but it simply felt different from before. There was an undeniable connection between his lousy business figures and his lousy energy. He felt it in his negotiations with big clients. In the past he'd dived straight in and won everyone over with his boyish smile and enthusiasm. Now he had to torture himself.

Turning to him, Johanna caressed his back with her warm hand and whispered, 'Hush, little baby.' This soothed him, it felt good. He thought about how broken Johanna had been when she'd embarked on the course here. Zero self-confidence, zero joie-de-vivre and zero idea of who she was or who she could be. On the very first day he'd done an exercise with her, the miracle question, which basically consisted of imagining that all your problems had disappeared overnight. He'd asked her what would make her realise, when she woke up the following morning, that a miracle must have happened to her. Without hesitation she answered, 'I'd no longer desire to stay in bed with my head beneath the duvet.'

Then he'd built her back up, step by step. After a week she'd lost her whispering voice. After a fortnight her eyes began to gleam and after three weeks she smiled for the first time. And thus she slowly returned to life. Although there couldn't be any excusing his behaviour, it must be noted that she had come to him. One evening she was standing outside the door to his attic apartment with a bottle of prosecco. And he thought he was possibly

entitled to sample some of the happiness that had arisen in his client, like a vampire getting from others what he could no longer have himself.

Now she lay beside him, whispering lullabies into his ear that calmed his heart. The tables had turned; now he was the one who wished to stay beneath the duvet forever. Alex fell into a deep, dreamless sleep from which he didn't awaken until the alarm came on with the nine o'clock news. He surfaced slowly, his head aching and tummy rumbling. Clearly no miracle had happened to him overnight.

Marlene took the lift down to the underground garage, got into her midnight-blue Mercedes convertible and started the engine. She drove along to Elbe to the motorway, through suburbs she'd never seen before. She'd been living in Hamburg for ten years but the only routes she knew were from her furnished apartment to the office and to the gym she visited twice a week. In truth she'd only intended to stay in the apartment until she'd found something else. But the longer she lived there the more pointless it seemed to look for another place she'd have to furnish herself, which to Marlene was as ghastly a prospect as that of being surrounded by neighbours who might pop round with the customary bread and salt to welcome the new tenant.

Her apartment block was for businesspeople who stayed for weeks or months. She was the only permanent tenant, which was why the property manager had recently asked again whether she'd like to have her name on the sign by her doorbell, where usually only numbers were marked. Of course she didn't. Why would she?

Marlene left the house at seven in the morning and came back at around ten p.m. In essence she only needed the bathroom and bedroom. The excessively large caramel-coloured sofa in her sitting room had remained virtually unused in all these years. Just like the kitchen, whose oiled oak

work surfaces had never seen any action. Recently she'd tried to heat up a pizza in the oven, which had generated large amounts of smoke when the polystyrene shipping protection caught fire. In her fridge were an out-of-date carton of low-fat yoghurt, a pack of chia seed butter, still unopened, and a bottle of champagne.

Marlene knew that people found her odd, but she was used to it. She'd been an odd child too, an odd teenager and an odd young woman. Eventually she stopped trying not to be odd. She couldn't help thinking of the time when her mother tried to put her arms around her in their small hallway at home in Schwabach. This came as such a surprise that Marlene instinctively recoiled. She recalled her mother's cold hands on her bare upper arms, her flight reflex, the disappointed eyes and her mother's words: 'What's wrong with you, Marlene?'

Hmm, good question. As Marlene took the slip road onto the motorway she felt the warm wind, the sun and smelled the grass that was being mown on the central reservation. She realised to her astonishment that all of this felt pretty good. She had little experience of such unplanned moments. Usually, tinted panorama windows and subtly perfumed air-conditioning units separated her from the outside world. The feeling of summer that washed over her was intense, reminding her of the bungalow in that holiday village by the lake, where she'd once gone with her mother. The memories such a spontaneous car drive could spark, Marlene thought.

Normally her mother wasn't present in her thoughts, yet now she'd entered them twice within half an hour. Which begged the question of whether spontaneity was such a good thing after all.

'You were an accident,' her mother had always said with an expression as if she were referring the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. She'd been forty at the time and about to separate from her husband when Marlene appeared. Maybe she'd wanted a fresh start, a different life with another man. But that was no longer possible. Because of the accident. Her parents stayed together and the accusation remained – it was never articulated but Marlene always sensed it was there.

Her mother had been worried, always worried, especially about all those viruses and illnesses that existed in the world. Whenever Marlene dropped a toy as a child, her mother would first clean the toy, then Marlene's hands and finally her own hands with antiseptic wipes. Even today the smell of those wipes still lingered in Marlene's nostrils, which together with her mother's sweet perfume produced a nauseating cocktail.

Drinking water was of great importance too. Most people fell ill because they didn't drink enough, her mother used to say. Every night before going to bed Marlene had to down two large glasses of water. As a result she rarely slept through the night because either she needed to go to the loo or she woke up from a nightmare in which she'd been transformed into a dried-out mummy.

Later, when she was an adolescent, Marlene barely drank anything, but she would eat compost and burn holes with a lighter in the fringe that her mother had cut meticulously. If, despite Marlene's oddities, a boy ever showed an interest in her, her mother would ensure the attempt failed, either by telling the boy embarrassing stories about Marlene or making her afraid of him. 'You have to watch out, Marlene,' her mother said. 'Boys are just waiting for the moment to pounce.'

Marlene always wore a number of layers of clothing, which meant the contours of her body could only be guessed at. She had filthy fingernails that she painted with black varnish, listened to Goth music and liked deserted cemeteries.

At the age of nineteen she had sex for the first time with a guy she barely knew. In a bush in the park. The experience was cold and painful. It seemed as if her mother was right.

When nobody expected anything from her anymore she studied philosophy and business studies, and applied for a middle-management job at Aviola, for which she had neither the qualifications nor the experience. Nonetheless she beat all her competitors at the assessment centre, landed the job and set out on her frenzied career. She discovered that work was the perfect way of life for her, because the most important things in the firm were productivity and efficiency. Moreover, her oddities were accepted too so long as she was successful.

Social contact with her colleagues was organised along purely functional lines. She had a good sense of who she could become even more productive with, she gathered the right people around her, who in turn profited from working closely with her. There were no false expectations, no complicated feelings, just crystal-clear interests.

Marlene turned off the motorway, then drove past villages and lakes. The tarmac became ever bumpier, the villages ever rarer until only woods lined the roads and she even saw a fox dart across ahead of her. So this was Brandenburg, Marlene thought. Rather beautiful, actually – not too many people, just beeches and pines, wild animals and a sky that appeared endless. She drove more slowly, breathed in the air with its tang of pine resin and didn't feel bad at all until her gaze fell on the satnav: only eight minutes till the re-education camp.

It was shortly before ten o'clock when Alex, accompanied by his assistants, stepped out onto the castle's garden terrace to greet the new arrivals. Ten participants had signed up for the two-week programme *Connect with yourself*. It was an intensive package with yoga and meditation, one-on-one coaching, group exercises, forest bathing, feedback sessions, body and energy work, shiatsu massages and thalassotherapy. The clients were staying in luxurious apartments, there was an Ayurvedic breakfast, a vegan lunch buffet and five-course evening menu. In short, a programme for people who at least hadn't excluded the possibility that money could make them happy.

Alex stayed at the top of the outdoor staircase that led down from the terrace to the park, allowing him to watch the course participants come up to him. Depending on an individual's speed this could take between thirty seconds and a minute, sufficient time to form a first impression of the newcomers. For example, the chubby woman in a gaudy flowery dress, who ascended the steps energetically, regularly stopping to take an excited look around. Alex called this type the Marvellers; he liked working with them because they were open, willing to experiment and easy to enthuse. Behind her slunk a man in his mid-forties wearing a crumpled linen suit, who clutched on to the wrought-iron rail, his gaze fixed on the steps. He was quite clearly one of the Uncertains, who were reluctant to let themselves in

for something new. Particularly at the start they needed a lot of care and attention. He would send the linen suit man to Lina, the breathing therapist, who with her maternal, optimistic manner and Saxon dialect made people forget any hesitancy and doubt.

Then there was the woman with the outdoor sandals, black leggings and straw hat, who was obviously an Experienced, identifiable by her abdominal breathing, almost demonstrative composure and colourful bracelets, which probably were from her latest retreat on Crete. The Experienceds generally proved to be good clients because they were active and pulled the others along with them. But they could be annoying too, if they felt so enlightened that they wanted to impress the others with their bodily experience and spiritual willingness. If the straw-hat woman was one of this second type they'd have to take countermeasures from the beginning.

The other participants gradually drifted in too. Last of all, a woman in Nike trainers, light-blue jeans and raspberry-coloured T-shirt climbed the steps briskly. Slim, she'd been scrutinising him from afar and seemed to be slightly irritated. This must be Marlene Buchholz. A few days ago Alex had taken a call from Bernd Finckenstein, the CEO of Aviola. Alex had coached Finckenstein several years back; now the latter wanted his successor to be made fit for the job. Finckenstein had talked rather vaguely of a 'woman with a strong personality'. The picture he'd painted of his colleague was pretty much that of a sociopath – not uninteresting but a definite challenge.

‘I have to know if Marlene Buchholz is prepared to work on herself,’
Finckenstein had said.

Alex had told him that this wasn’t how they did things at the Academy because for him it was important that clients came willingly and wanted themselves to change something. But then Finckenstein had let on that he could envision his company’s entire business coaching programme being run by the Academy in future – if Alex scored a success with Marlene Buchholz. When he heard this, Alex stopped answering back; having Aviola as a new major client would solve his financial problems at a stroke. Sometimes, Alex thought, miracles do happen. At any rate, in these two weeks he would do his best to set Marlene Buchholz on the right path.

Alex hadn’t said anything to his colleagues about their unusual client; it would have only made them nervous. It was crucial that everything proceeded as normally as possible, which was why there wasn’t a special plan for Marlene Buchholz. He would take a good look at the woman at his leisure and then decide the best path to take. She came up the last few steps and then she was facing him. He offered her his hand.

‘Hello, I’m Alex Grow. Welcome to Schönerlinde!’

She seemed not to see his hand and looked him straight in the eye.

‘Alex Grow?’

‘Yes, founder and director of the Academy.’

‘So what’s your real name?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, that sounds rather like an alias. But, if you insist, I’m Marilyn Monroe.’

Feeling the blood rush to his head, he mumbled, ‘Maybe we can discuss this later.’

‘If you like. I just thought that, seeing as we’re going on this *Connect with yourself* voyage of discovery, maybe we ought to know each other’s real names. But you’re the boss,’ she said, sauntering past Alex to the castle entrance.

Alex stood there as if rooted to the spot; his assistants looked at him quizzically. How could this woman have fazed him so instantly? Clearly she was of a different calibre than he’d anticipated. Inadvertently (or maybe intentionally?) she’d hit a sore spot. For this name had been given to him by a man who’d once been the most important person in his life, Oka Mubarkana, a Brahmin shaman on Bali – both teacher and father to Alex. He’d gone to see Oka when he didn’t know what else to do. Oka had helped his mind grow to become alert and wise. The name he’d given Alex was to serve as a permanent reminder of this.

He could have told her this, just as he’d told it so often before to all sorts of people. Because it was a lovely story that showed how you could always reinvent yourself, how it was possible to shape your mind, take control of your own destiny. But for some reason he no longer believed in

the tale; it seemed contrived, artificial. Like a comforting fable an inconsolable person told themselves. The disbelief hadn't just materialised today, but he hadn't felt it so strongly before. It didn't have anything to do with Marlene Buchholz's cold eyes or her scoffing tone, but with Alex himself and the crows circling above him.

He recalled Oka's face, his brown, parchment-like skin, the broad lips, the dark rings around his eyes that were at once so reassuring and enigmatic. Alex hadn't spoken to Oka since returning from Bali more than twenty years ago. Oka didn't telephone and he didn't write – if you wanted to see Oka you had to go to him, down the dragon path to the village, down the goat path into the mountains, all the way to the red rock that touched the clouds. There he sat, on the lump of basalt where his grandfather had also once sat, his gaze fixed on his folded hands.

Sometimes Alex wondered whether Oka was still alive. It was hard to say how old he would be today because even back then he'd seemed ageless. Alex felt sadness well up inside him, for this belief that Oka had imparted to him was as reassuring as the rings around his eyes; it was what had carried him through all the years. He felt a coldness in his chest, he felt vulnerable. Which could also be down to his tiredness. How, in this state, was he going to be able to put his clients in the right mood? How could he help the woman who quite evidently was not seeking his help?

Alex entered the large hall where the participants were already sitting in a semicircle. Normally he would greet them with the tale of the two wolves, in which a grandfather is sitting around a campfire at night with his grandson, both of them staring into the flames. ‘Do you know,’ the grandfather says, ‘that the hot fire and cold darkness are like two wolves who live inside us. The good wolf harbours love, gratitude, compassion and forgiveness. The bad wolf is driven by envy, greed, hatred and fear. The two wolves fight within us, every day.’ Still gazing at the flames, the grandson says, ‘Which wolf is the stronger?’ The grandfather replies, ‘The one you feed.’

It was a simple parable that everyone immediately understood and yet it resonated because of course everybody asked themselves which wolf they fed more. From there it was a short hop to the message at the heart of the coaching programme: With the right ideas and outlook we can take control of our lives.

This time, however, Alex decided to take a different approach. He’d told the story so often that it didn’t resonate with him anymore; he needed something new that would surprise even himself. Maybe it wasn’t the best idea to improvise after a sleepless night and a morning plagued with doubt, but he did it all the same. What was the point in imparting pearls of wisdom to others that you yourself ignored? And one of his guiding principles was: Follow your inner voice.

He thus stood in front of the participants, allowed his gaze to wander from one to the next and began speaking. ‘Who know us best of all? Our parents, our spouses, our friends, our children? What do we show others and what do we keep to ourselves? And how well do we know ourselves? From the day of our birth we experience ourselves every single day. We know whether we like cauliflower, whether we like jogging, whether we’re sensitive to the cold, and whether we prefer classical music or heavy metal. But do we know why we married that particular man or woman? Why we opted for this or that profession? Do we know what’s really good for us? What’s really right for us? Or have we merely got used to doing certain things and shunning others? Maybe because we want to please our partners, parents or friends? Or because that’s what we learned as a child?’

From their faces Alex could see that he had the others’ full attention. It was always interesting to watch how people’s posture changed when they were listening properly. Most were sitting quite still, their hands crossed, breathing more slowly and focusing on him.

‘You’ve probably guessed,’ Alex said, ‘what I’m getting at here. It’s quite possible that we don’t know ourselves all that well. That we only see a version of us, a side we cultivate while ignoring many other sides of us. We claim that we’re family minded, that we can’t cope with stress, that we’re striving for harmony and that we can’t make up our minds. But is that really

true? Or do we merely persuade ourselves that it's true? Because it would unnerve us to realise that we could also be completely different?'

These last words had visibly hit home with some of the participants; they were shifting about on their chairs, clearing their throats, trying to grasp the unsettling thoughts chasing around their grey matter.

'Yes, I know that to begin with it can be a bit scary to imagine that there are various possible versions of us. That maybe it was mere coincidence which set us on this or that path. We tend to regard our lives as predestined, which is reassuring, as it means we don't have to continually decide who we want to be and what we want to do. Destiny liberates us from the responsibility for ourselves. What can we do about the fact that we're shy? Is it our fault that we have such a short temper? That we're so unsporty? That we always go for the wrong partner?'

Alex left a long pause. 'The answer is: Yes! We *are* responsible for all of this. At some point we decided, in most cases unconsciously, to be the way we are today. To some of you this may come as bad news, because it's far more comfortable to shift the responsibility for our own mistakes onto destiny. But, my friends, it's actually rather good news, because it means that you can change all of this!'

The group gave a collective sigh of relief. Those who'd been sitting there tensely gradually relaxed; those who'd been nervously rubbing their hands together settled down. Which was also a result of the group dynamic;

over time an intense shared experience inevitably led ten bodies to becoming one. Relatively quickly, in Alex's experience, emotional leaders would emerge from a group session, and these would pull the others along. As had quickly become apparent, in this group the straw-hat woman and a bald man in a red shirt were setting the emotional pace. Essentially one just had to get through to these two in order to have the others on board. By the same token it was crucial not to lose both of them, or the entire group would go astray.

Alex made the participants stand and hold hands. 'I am going to help you connect to yourselves. I will also help you create the most powerful version of yourselves. I will be with you when you discard what isn't good for you. Our thoughts, our attitudes can determine the course of our lives. You can control your lives yourselves!'

The straw-hat woman began to cry and soon afterwards everyone was hugging everyone else. The woman in the gaudy flowery dress was snuggling up to Marlene Buchholz, while the man in the linen suit was holding hands with the bald one. Alex looked around contentedly. The group was ready to begin.

It took Marlene ages to free herself from the clutches of the woman in the flowery dress. Whenever the embrace loosened for a moment and Marlene tried to wriggle out of it the woman pressed herself more tightly to her. Her décolleté smelled of snowdrops, sweat and the rosemary oil that had been dabbed on their foreheads when they arrived. The woman's arms seemed to be reinforced with steel bars that dug painfully into Marlene's ribs.

Marlene was usually no fan of physical contact. She didn't like office hugs, not even implied ones, and she avoided offering people her hand to shake, which might have been a legacy of her antiseptic childhood. And so this here was truly challenging for her. And this guy, Alex Grow, with his perfect boyish smile, stupid leather amulet (for which there must be some particular explanation), greying urban-Samurai topknot and exaggeratedly sonorous wellness-voice, came across as a caricature of himself. Marlene bet that eighty per cent of his female clients fell in love with him on the first day and believed their souls had been magically transformed when they spent the rest of their time roaming around in a hormonal fug.

Even his introductory speech, that self-awareness gibberish, that ten-cent digression on existentialism, had been too much. It had reminded her of the time when she'd first read Hermann Hesse in her grandmother's cellar

and had suddenly been struck by the impression that she understood the whole world. But she was only fourteen and at that age such feelings were permissible. Now, in this group of adults, she found other people's existential emotional turbulence suspect. But within these coaching circles it was clearly the done thing to outdo each other in enthusiasm, to work each other up into a high.

Marlene suspected it wasn't a good idea to mentally distance herself from the group with such vehemence; it would only make everything more taxing. After all, she was going to have to stick it out here for a fortnight, and that would definitely work better if she showed a little engagement with the whole circus. In fact this was precisely what she'd intended to do; she'd come up with a mantra that she'd muttered to herself throughout the drive here: It's not important how you survive this fortnight; the main thing is that you *do* survive! Do what they do! Say what they say! Laugh at what they laugh at!

But her problem was that she had no experience of play-acting. She wished she could pretend, but as soon as she attempted to brush away the discrepancy between the demands of the outside world and her mindset she felt an immovable blockage within her. How much simpler her life would be, she suspected, if she were able to do this. But she couldn't.

This didn't have anything to do with any principles; she didn't think it important to behave consistently or with moral coherence. Her problem

was in all likelihood far more banal, far more fundamental. She'd often pondered this and only come up with a single explanation for why she was so obstinate and inflexible when it came to social interaction. Marlene simply didn't know how to go about bonding with other people.

OK, put so bluntly it sounded pretty bad. Of course she knew how to reach out to people; sometimes she even had conversations that, if one were being generous, could be described as small talk. Things only got difficult when she had to show an interest in someone else's emotional life. She found this indiscrete somehow, almost intrusive, which was probably also related to the fact that she didn't feel the slightest desire to put her soul on show.

It had become a sort of fashion, this psychologising, along the lines of: I'll show you my problems, you show me yours and then we'll feel totally connected. And we don't just have problems, we've got a trauma or two as well. Interesting traumas, of course, with a historical context or at least a backdrop of discrimination. Emotional injury had become a mark of distinction.

This was one reason why at some point Marlene stopped going to parties. She couldn't bear this delight at wallowing in an emotional quagmire, this exhibitionistic display of one's life wounds, this permanent self-diagnosis which of course had a reassuring element too, because it meant that all of life's problems could be explained scientifically, as it were.

People weren't lazy, they simply procrastinated a little. People weren't unfocused, they were merely victims of an attention-deficit syndrome. People weren't annoying, they were highly sensitive. And people weren't incompetent at their job, they just suffered from that wretched imposter syndrome.

It all sounded better and more exciting. These days, rather than having bog-standard heartache, you were stuck in a toxic relationship. The perfectly normal February gloom was in reality a depressive episode. You were no longer affected by life but triggered. Sex wasn't bad, it was ruined by patriarchal structures. The boss wasn't some banal arsehole, but a complete narcissist at the very least. These lifestyle afflictions were recognised by society and even *de rigueur* in certain circles.

Marlene should have been able to play along wonderfully with all of this because she was very familiar with a wide variety of afflictions. She'd had a childhood that could justifiably be described as shitty. Nor would it be an exaggeration to talk of a fucked-up adolescence and finally of a lonely adulthood. She was rarely content and seldom felt fulfilled, let alone happy. But she thought this was OK, she wasn't complaining. She knew that sometimes you had to grit your teeth; her expectation wasn't that everything had to be good all of the time. She knew too that her own attitude was as borderline as that of those suffering from lifestyle afflictions, because instead of analysing everything she simply didn't want to know anything.

First and foremost this was linked to her expectations of life. Her method of self-improvement was to be as efficient and productive as possible. She was used to working hard, putting aside her personal desiderata and dedicating herself fully to the service of her company. If she succeeded in this then sometimes she'd feel a coy contentment, though usually it would fade immediately before the next task.

She knew that her own attitude wasn't perfect, that in certain circumstances it could even be described as problematic. But unlike those suffering from lifestyle afflictions she wasn't seeking to convert anyone and didn't think that everyone else ought to live as she did. Moreover, Marlene believed that a few more of her sort would probably be more useful to society than those hypersensitive individuals who failed to perform because they'd had another burn-out. Marlene saw this with her younger female colleagues who were so preoccupied with speaking to each other correctly, avoiding difficult topics and defending their honour as women, that there was barely any energy left for their actual work. These pony-riding, mousy women with their fringes and large glasses, who began every sentence with 'Actually' or 'Precisely', even though they actually knew precisely nothing.

Marlene didn't believe that there was a solution to her private problems, something which of course the victims of lifestyle afflictions saw very differently. They were convinced that all their weaknesses could be healed and thus put themselves under enormous pressure. Why couldn't

people get enough of all these self-help manuals that promised happiness and a better life, and why had mental health become a huge sector of the economy? Because the message hovering above everything was: Dear all, troublesome, negative feelings are OK, but you should get over them as quickly as possible. And because nowadays there were so many ways of healing (online for the less moneyed and in a Brandenburg castle for the affluent), there were no more excuses either. If you didn't take measures to heal yourself, you were to blame.

And now she too had ended up in a sanatorium, although if she happened, perhaps by accident, to listen to her inner voice, even Marlene felt a certain need to be healed. Presumably it wasn't such a bad thing, she sometimes thought, to work on her social skills, for her very personal blockage about connecting with other people had now reached proportions that even she regarded as suspect. This blockage would already materialise if, for example, someone said, 'Tell me a bit about yourself.' Her ex-boyfriend Markus had always said this, and each time she'd felt paralysed by shock. What should she say about herself? Markus had said at the time that he thought couples really ought to know a certain amount about each other. And obviously she'd understood this, she wasn't stupid; she'd merely found it difficult to properly satisfy his need.

Just as she was now finding it difficult to remember her mantra (Do what they do! Say what they say! Laugh at what they laugh at!) Which was

possibly down to the Tibetan happiness bracelet that one of the assistants had put on her when she entered the castle. The bracelet was made of green jade stones which, according to the assistant not only increased mental agility but also boosted your courage and personality, and even helped dispel fear and anxiety. Stupidly Marlene had thought after a few minutes that this bracelet might have the exact opposite effect on her. She suddenly felt anxious. Besides, right then the next act to set the mood took place: the sun-gate ceremony. This consisted of two assistants holding each other's hands and raising their arms to form a small, living gate through which the participants had to slip through, one by one. As each person passed through the assistants cried, 'Bravo!' and on the other side of the gate stood Alex Grow who gave all of them a ceremonial hug, as if they'd just climbed Everest.

Eventually it was Marlene's turn. She took a deep breath, walked through the gate and ended up against Alex Grow's muscular torso, which felt surprisingly good. He whispered in her ear, 'Welcome, Marlene. Let yourself fall, I'll catch you.' And then things got really complicated because part of her wanted nothing more than to remain in this embrace for ever, while another part got ready for flight. Fortunately Alex let go of her then and Marlene joined the others, where she was handed an energy stone by an assistant and suddenly felt absolutely exhausted.

[END OF SAMPLE]